DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 205 888 CS 005 744

AUTHOR Pacheco, Beth M.
TITLE Back to Basic Stories: Literature in a Thematic College Reading Course.
PUB DATE 81
NOTE 14p.: Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the International Reading Association (26th, New Orleans, LA, April 27-May 1, 1981).

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS College Curriculum; *Course Content; Higher Education; *Interdisciplinary Approach; Literary Criticism; *Literature Appreciation; Reading Programs; *Remedial Reading; *Short Stories; *Thematic Approach

ABSTRACT

This paper describes a thematically organized interdisciplinary reading course, offers a rationale for including literature in a reading curriculum, and outlines an approach for presenting the short story in the context of a thematic interdisciplinary college reading course. It concludes with a brief discussion of two short stories and provides study guide questions to accompany each story. (RL)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED205888

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL IN MICROFICHE ONLY HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Beth M. Pacheco

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

BACK TO BASIC STORIES: LITERATURE IN A THEMATIC COLLEGE READING COURSE

Beth M. Pacheco

Developmental courses can introduce students to the experience of the humanistic tradition which is basic to an American college education. This paper which is written in that spirit describes a thematically organized interdisciplinary reading course, a rationale for including literature in a reading curricula and an approach for presenting the short story in the context of a thematic interdisciplinary college reading course. It concludes with a brief discussion of two short stories and their accompanying study guide questions.

THE THEMATIC COLLEGE READING COURSE

A thematic course presents a single concept from many perspectives, thus introducing students to the experience of examining ideas from disparate informed points of view. Designing a thematic Developmental Reading course entails selecting a concept, gathering related materials from various disciplines and genres and sequencing the material with target skill a determining factor.[1]

The course which I teach to advanced reading students at New York City Technical College has the college catalog designation, "DR012 Developmental Reading - Level II." The unofficial title of the course which I present to my students is DR012 "The Autonomous Individual." Each reading reflects an aspect of the key social science concept, autonomy.

CS805766

The theme of autonomy is particularly intriguing to those students who perceive a contrast in this American ideal of self rule and the constraints and pressures imposed by their struggle as academically underprepared students who must compete with traditional college students while meeting family responsibilities and committments to jobs.

Over a number of semesters my students and I have compiled an extensive resource of selections for which I have designed skills lessons; therefore, the composition of the reading list varies from term to term.[2] Two stories, however, Bernard Malamud's "A Summer's Reading,"[3] and Daniel Keyes' "Flowers for Algernon",[4] are constants as are complementary materials from introductory level texts which introduce students to the kinds of reading assignments and the modes of discourse they will encounter in their regular college courses, e.g., the scientific method in psychology; participant observation in anthropology; development and causal analysis in history.[5]

The topics which are germane to the unifying theme of autonomy include defense mechanisms, inferiority attitudes, puberty rites and rituals, cross cultural views of adolescence, Ericson's age related tasks and Freud's levels of personality. These readings provide context for skills practice in note taking, text annotation and underlining, outlining, summarizing, and test taking, and they also provide information which students use in their analysis and interpretation of the aforementioned short stories.

THE SHORT STORY IN COLLEGE READING

There is resistance to including literature in developmental reading on the grounds that it is a time consuming embellishment which deters students from the goal of minimal proficiency. I have found to the con-

trary that the analysis of short literary works is very important in a reading course which seeks to take students beyond minimal proficiency towards cognitive, affective and aesthetic maturation.

Cognitive Development

With regard to learning theory, reading is called an intellectual guessing game, a hypothesis testing exercise in which data are continually discovered, processed, interpreted, added or discarded. It is recognized as a dynamic mental activity which entails reviewing, reorganizing and adapting stored information in order to assimilate new information.

The unfolding of the plot of a story gives the reading student a vivid, dramatic and memorable opportunity to carry through the process, to make hypotheses and find them validated or in failing to do so, to "guess again," as characters develop, conflicts intensify, relationships change and multiple levels and meanings of language emerge.

Furthermore, the short story is a genre which lends itself to analysis on many levels, and accompanying lessons can have a skill focus which guides students from concrete to abstract thinking. A student who in a lesson on a basic skill such as categorization struggles to distinguish characters from plot and plot from setting, can eventually be confronted with the task of discovering an allegorical or psychological interpretation of the same work.

Affective Development

The carefully selected story is also a means for engendering affective growth particularly in those students who are withdrawn and reticent, anxious or defensive. Developmental students whose academic experience

has probably been frustrating and disappointing are frequently much more willing to engage in character analysis than self analysis. For them the story acts as a shield against direct confrontation; yet it gives pain as well as pleasure, an opportunity for catharsis in the classic sense and consciousness raising in the modern sense.[6]

Aesthetic Development

Finally, the short story presents language and ideas to developmental students which go beyond the utilitarian, the pragmatic, and that which is often construed as relevant to their lives. (In the case of my urban community college students, topics deemed "relevant" include drug addiction, alcoholism, anomie, child abuse, and similar instances of social deviance and pathology, all of which appear to stigmatize their environments and ethnic communities.)

Louise M. Rosenblatt in The Reader, the Text, the Poem puts the problem into contemporary, pedagogical and philosophical perspective.

> The capacity to participate in verbally complex texts is not widely fostered in our educational system, and desirable habits of reflections, interpretation, and evaluation are not widespread. These are goals that should engender powerful reforms in language training and literary education. But none of these are attainable if good literary works of art are envisioned as the province of only a small, highly trained elite. Once the literary work is seen as part of the fabric of individual lives, the gap may be at least narrowed, without relinquishing recognition of standards of excellence.[7]

AN APPROACH FOR INCLUDING THE SHORT STORY IN A COLLEGE READING COURSE

In presenting an aesthetic work such as a short story, as in presenting a college text chapter or a lesson in a reading text, the aim

of instruction in the developmental class is to introduce and reinforce basic and critical reading skills.

Sequencing of Lessons

In presenting the genre, the elements of the short story--plot, setting, character--are appropriate to a lesson on categorization as students collate information and label it accordingly. If no story has been assigned, familiar fairy or folk tales can be used for this kind of basic analysis. Students can paraphrase them easily and in many instances children's classics cross language and cultural boundaries, an important consideration if there are ESL students in the reading class.

A following lesson will focus on identifying and explaining patterns of organization such as time order, comparison/contrast, cause and effect, listing, development of main ideas through illustrative or supporting details. Students are asked, for example, to compare and contrast characters, to discuss their behavior in terms of cause (motivation) and effect (response). To sensitize students to time order, the instructor can assist them to trace the events which comprise a plot and which may include flashbacks, simultaneous happenings, foreshadowings, portents and prophesies of what's to come. Descriptive passages of setting and characters can be used to present and to elicit the distinction between main ideas and supportive illustrative details.

A lesson on inference skills will require students to perform a variety of creative tasks: to construe antecedent action, to invoke original endings, to follow up their reading with original sequels, to

search for universal meanings and to demonstrate in their interpretations an awareness of our common humanity as well as our idiosyncratic or cultural differences.

An obligatory activity will require that students analyze characters' actions in light of the multiple meanings of the targeted concept, autonomy. A final lesson which focusses on critical reading will require students to state their criteria and defend their evaluations of an author's ability to create character rather than caricature, drama rather than melodrama, work of art rather than one dimensional political tract.

Two Stories About Autonomous Individuals

"A Summer's Reading" works particularly well in a college reading course for a number of reasons. It is accessible, yet characters and plot lend themselves to interpretation on an abstract level and the language has a degree of complexity which bears more than cursory scrutiny. The two principle characters, George Syonovitch and Mr. Cattanzarra, are identifiable as well as possible identity figures. George, the only son in a broken working class family, is, at twenty, a high school dropout and a community outsider. Isolated and anomic, he lacks direction, ego and will. His longing for recognition is hidden behind a facade of indifference. Mr. Cattanzarra, the change maker in the subway, has education and a job which entitle him to status in the community, but he is an alcoholic and is doomed to a dull, routinized existence in the singularly uninspiring neighborhood.

An assignment to summarize plot focusses students' attention on the causal sequences upon which the story is structured. The action commen-

ces with a conversation between George and Mr. Cattanzarra in which the latter pretends to believe George's empty boast that he is reading a hundred books as a summer's project. For a brief time George gains some sorely needed ego strength. The story concludes with George entering the library, counting off a hundred books, and sitting down at a table to read. In the interim, George suffers. Hence, "A Summer's Reading" belongs to the genre of literature which invokes the universal experience, coming of age.

"Flowers for Algernon" is a fictionalized account of an experiment to improve intelligence using surgical techniques on a severely retarded person. The subject of the experiment, Charlie, is also the hero and the narrator. He tells his story in a series of chronologically sequenced, dated progress reports, and he presents, along with his own case history, that of a second subject in the experiment, a white mouse called Algernon.

The immediate effects of the surgery become apparent to the reader in the striking improvement in Charlie's spelling and grammer; the less obvious effects, in his gradually emerging sophistication which has consequences for his relationships with all other characters. These changing relationships are clear, easy to recognize and to monitor; yet, when guided toward a more thoughtful interpretation, the reading student becomes sensitive to a number of complex, challenging and poignant paradoxes: Charlie's achievements lead to his rejection by others; his heightened awareness leads to disillusionment and unhappiness; implicit in Charlie's progress is his regression which is foreshadowed in the fate of Algernon.

Question Design

The study guide questions which accompany the short stories are open ended and designed for several purposes including the application of concepts and skills presented in other readings and exercises which comprise the course. (To this end students are continually urged to review their notes in order to perform tasks and make informed judgments.) A second tangential purpose is to increase students' awareness of their ability and need to draw upon prior knowledge in order to reach a broader understanding of what the author is attempting to say in the text, and a third is to develop a creative as well as mentally active reader.

Louise Rosenblatt's explanation of the process carried on in the reading of a play or novel applies to the short story as well.

> ...the words of the text have enabled the reader to live through a series of events, to relate them clearly, chronologically, and causally, and to organize his own emotional responses to this experience. The reader not only responds to the textual cues by generating the characters, situation, actions they signify; he also retains in his memory and attitudes the basis for interpreting the sequence of events as they unfold, and he provides the experiential ligatures between them that consitute plot. [8]

Following are samples of the study guide questions which accompany "Flowers for Algernon" and "A Summer's Reading." The questions have worked particularly well when assigned as collaborative or small group learning tasks.

"Flowers for Algernon" by Daniel Keyes

1. Which pattern is most evident in the structure of this story: time order, cause-effect, comparison-contrast, list. Refer to the events of the story to support your choice.

2. Discuss contrast as it applies to characters' relationships throughout the story. Include dates that mark significant changes in these relationships:

    A. Charlie and Algernon.

    B. Charlie and the men at the factory.

    C. Charlie and Miss Kinian.

    D. Charlie and Drs. Strauss and Nemean.

    E. Charlie and Charles.

    F. Charlie and you, the reader.

Fiction writers depend upon the creativity of their readers. They deliberately look for words which will stimulate readers' imaginations to visualize characters and setting, hear dialogue and feel emotion. Very often the fiction writer implies; that is, he or she suggests rather than clearly states information about events or conditions. The reader infers; that is, he or she brings ideas, information and emotion to the writer's words and on that basis draws conclusions about conditions or events.

3. When "Flowers for Algernon" begins, Charlie is thirty seven years old. The writer tells the reader very little about Charlie's childhood. From what you have read in the story and from your own experience and information, create a scene from Charlie's childhood for students to dramatize.

4. Write up the "experiment" using scientific terminology:

    A. Hypothesis

    B. Procedure

    C. Observations

D. Conclusions

What's lost?

5. Is Charlie an autonomous individual? To support your opinion, refer to the choices that are available to him and to the decisions which he makes.

"A Summer's Reading" by Bernard Malamud

1. George is twenty (20). Considering what you have read about him in the story and your personal experience, describe George at age ten (10).

at age thirty (30).

2. Explain the apparent contradiction in George's reference to the young men on the corner as "A couple of them he had known all his whole life, but nobody recognized each other."

3. Discuss whether George is speaking literally or figuratively when he says of Mr. Cattanzarra, "He had small blue eyes which could hurt if you looked at them too long."

4. Give a symbolic interpretation of Mr. Cattanzarra's profession.

5. Describe someone who has been a "change maker" in your life.

Before attempting to answer the following questions, review your notes on symptoms of inferiority and defense mechanisms.

6. What symptoms of inferiority does George reveal?

7. Is Mr. Cattanzarra George's Id, Ego or Super Ego? Explain.

8. When, if ever, does George become an autonomous individual?

9. Discuss the following aspects of the story particularly as they relate to the text book excerpt on rite of passage:

A. George's room.

B. George's relationship to Mr. Cattanzarra.

C. George's changing position in the community.

D. George's emotional and physical suffering.

CONCLUSION

In "going back to basics," which, unfortunately, much college reading never left, we are taking great strides away from the objectives and expectations of a humanistic college education. Those of us who are committed to the exacting mode of developmental instruction are well aware of the myriad economic and academic demands placed upon our students. We must realize, however, that goals which are purely practical and pragmatic, although often good sources of motivation, can also limit the scope of a student's academic, career and social achievement. For most of these students, college is the last chance to engage in spirited intellectual inquiry where the mind is engaged by art and challenged by ideas.

John Ciardi has observed that the function of a college is not only to train students but to put them in touch with what the best human minds have thought. The thematic interdisciplinary college reading course which includes literature provides the foundation for that kind of education. With this approach to developmental reading, "back to basics" is interpreted as a return to rather than a repudiation of the humanistic tradition which is "basic" to an American college education for all students.

Footnotes

1. Joan Gregg, Beth Pacheco, and Serena Nanda, "Thematic Unity and Collaborative Learning in a College Reading Course," Community Review, (November, 1980), 3-8.

2. The following thematically related selections are among those to which students have responded very enthusiastically:

Bruno Bettleheim, "Joey: 'A Mechanical Boy,'" Scientific American, March, 1959.

Bruno Bettleheim, "The Three Little Pigs: Pleasure Principle Versus Reality Principle," The Uses of Enchantment (New York: Vintage Books edition, Random House, 1977) pp. 41-45.

Kingsley Davis, "Final Note on a Case of Extreme Isolation," American Journal of Sociology (1947).

Phillip Meyer, "If Hitler Asked You to Electrocute a Stranger Would You? Probably," Workbook and Readings for Introductory Sociology, ed. Brian Vargus and Betty C. Levine (Lexington, Mass.:Xerox, 1978) pp. 137-143.

Aldous Husley "Propaganda Under a Dictatorship," The Borzoi College Reader, ed. Charles Muscatine and Marlene Griffith (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1968), pp. 26-31.

Harry F. Harlow and R. R. Zimmerman, "Affectional Responses in the Infant Monkey," Science 130 (1959), pp. 421-432.

3. Bernard Malamud, "A Summer's Reading," The Magic Barrel (New York: Farrar Straus and Giraux, 1971) pp. 135-144.

4. Daniel Keyes, "Flowers for Algernon," 100 Great Science Fiction Short Stories, ed. Isaac Asimov, Martin Harry Greenberg and Joseph Solander, (Garden City, N.Y., Doubleday, 1978).

5. For a discussion of the need to incorporate the organizing schema of the various academic disciplines into Developmental Writing curriculum see Ann Raimes, "Writing and Learning Across the Curriculum: The Experience of a Faculty Seminar," College English, 41 (1980, pp. 797-802.

6. For a discussion of the slow but inexorable process of personality change through engagement with life and books see Norman Holland, Five Readers Reading (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1975), pp. 201-231.

7. Louise M. Rosenblatt , The Reader, the Text, the Poem (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1978), p. 143.

8. Rosenblatt, p. 92.